Awareness of Sex Trafficking Must be Matched by Action and Resolve

By Utah Attorney General Sean D. Reyes

Most Americans are unaware that modern day slavery exists in the form of human trafficking. To many, the phrase “human trafficking” elicits connotations of a tragedy present only in far-flung third world countries. And while trafficking of men, women, and children truly is an international evil of epidemic proportions, it hits much closer to home in terms of victims and demand.

The United States Justice Department estimates that each year in the United States as many as 300,000 American children are at risk of being trafficked for commercial sex. The Polaris Project, an organization combating all forms of human trafficking, reports that 41% of sex trafficking cases and 20% of labor trafficking cases in the United States referenced United States citizens as victims.

In Utah, the 2002 abduction of Elizabeth Smart held our entire state engrossed in angst and fear for nine months until her miraculous return. But the horrors she suffered, including rape and abuse, are unfolding by the millions stateside and abroad. The calculus of this evil is truly disturbing, as these horrors are perpetrated by criminal organizations with vast resources far beyond that of individuals who kidnap and rape children. The U.S. Department of State estimates that in 2014, more than 20 million victims were being trafficked. Such trafficking has already surpassed arms dealing and is second only to drug trafficking as the most profitable criminal enterprises worldwide.

Victims are commonly adults, but more than 2 million are children. While some are sadly sold by their own families, others are sent unknowingly into the arms of traffickers in the guise of study abroad programs, modeling careers or foreign work opportunities. Many are abducted. While sexual trafficking and exploitation are the most prevalent objectives, some are sold for illegal adoptions, hard labor, or even killed to harvest their organs on the black market. Regardless of the purpose, it is the worst nightmare for parents and families.

Traffic in 18 million adults a year is horrific and inexcusable in any civilized society premised on the protection of the liberty and safety of citizens; the transformation of 2 million children into sexual contraband traded in an international market is ghastly, and no responsible law enforcement agency charged with protecting citizens can credibly ignore the problem.

I have six children ranging from 4 to 17-years old—similar in age to many who are held in captivity as child sex slaves. My father emigrated from the Philippines, where millions of Filipinos are estimated to be trafficked between several Asian nations. The demand for this type of depravity is sadly alive and well and the majority of the demand internationally comes from American men.

That is why, as Attorney General of Utah, I am so personally committed to combating human trafficking. Last year alone, we shut down several
illegitimate businesses in Utah acting as fronts for women trafficked from abroad. These victims had been drugged, beaten, isolated, raped, and forced to engage in sex for money here in our own state. Last year we also prosecuted the highest profile child trafficking case in Utah history wherein a foreign crime boss, here illegally, not only trafficked kids for sex but forced them to sell drugs. To prevent foreign trafficking operations from infiltrating my state, I traveled to South America a few months ago on an undercover mission with Operation Underground Railroad (OUR), a nonprofit established to combat child sexual trafficking around the world. My team and I split up among three cities, where scores of young girls were held as sex slaves.

Carefully coordinating with local law enforcement, and with the enthusiastic blessing of our governments, we executed a sting that liberated 127 girls (10 to 16 years old) from sexual slavery while sending the traffickers to prison. By training local law enforcement with cutting-edge technology and investigative techniques, we empowered them to combat these evils long term. International organizations worked with us to return girls to their jubilant families.

Last year the United States House of Representatives passed a series of bills to combat human trafficking. Recently, a bipartisan bill was introduced in the United States Senate strengthening law enforcement’s ability to investigate and prosecute individuals committing human trafficking crimes. These efforts are significant, but there is much work to be done to prevent this darkness from growing domestically and abroad. We must keep up the battle against this devastation to human lives and spirits by all available means.

The first step is to educate and bring awareness to our fellow Americans. That awareness must be matched by action and resolve. We can and must do our part because the lives of these children and their families, our children and our families, depend on it.